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8 Accused of Plot on Pope's Life Will Go on Trial in Rome Today

The following article is based on reporting by Claire Sterling and John Tagliabue and was written by Mr. Tagliabue.

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ROME, May 26 — A major courtroom trial that could throw light on obscure links of international terrorism begins here Monday when five Turks and three Bulgarians face charges they took part in a plot to assassinate Pope John Paul II.

The trial has special significance because two Bulgarian diplomats and an official of the Bulgarian state airline are among the accused. According to the state's key witness, they were part of the reported conspiracy that led to the attempt on the Pope's life in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981, and Italian justice officials say circumstantial evidence supports the charge.

The witness, Mehmet Ali Agca, who is now 27 years old, is serving a life sentence in a Rome prison after his conviction in July 1981 of having shot and seriously wounded the Pope during his weekly general audience.

During his trial, Mr. Agca, who was seized in St. Peter's Square, the site of the shooting, claimed to have acted alone. He later changed his testimony, contending that the assassination attempt was a result of an international plot, masterminded by the Bulgarian diplomats, in which he received the equivalent of \$1.2 million from a Turkish underworld figure living in Bulgaria.

Bulgarian Under House Arrest

Only four of the eight defendants will be present at the trial, which is expected to last several months. It will be held in a specially constructed high-security courtroom, dubbed the Trial Bunker, that was converted from a former gymnasium at a sports complex near the Olympic Stadium in Rome.

The courtroom has previously been used for trials of members of Italy's Red Brigades terrorist bands, including the men convicted of the kidnapping and slaying of Aldo Moro, the Italian political leader, in 1978.

In addition to Mr. Agca, who faces charges of smuggling into Italy the 9-millimeter Browning pistol he used in the shooting, attention at the trial will

focus on Sergei Ivanov Antonov, 37, the former Rome station chief of the Bulgarian state airline, Balkanair, and the only one of the accused Bulgarians in Italian custody.

Mr. Agca told investigators, in sometimes contradictory testimony, that the Bulgarian helped plan the plot and drove him and a second Turkish gunman to St. Peter's Square on the day of the shooting.

Mr. Antonov was arrested in Rome on Nov. 25, 1982, following Mr. Agca's testimony. He was transferred from Rebibbia Prison here to house arrest in a specially protected apartment last June because of failing health.

Trial Called C.I.A. Plot

Italian medical experts permitted the transfer to house arrest after Mr. Antonov began suffering intense headaches and gastric problems in prison. At a Bulgarian-arranged news conference in Rome last week, at which the trial was described as part of a Central Intelligence Agency plot, his sister, Tama Gheorgeva, said his failing health would prevent him from conducting "an active defense."

He would "only try to reply to the court's questions," she said.

While under house arrest, Mr. Antonov has been constantly accompanied by Bulgarian Embassy officials. Some Italian officials have expressed concern that he is under the influence of drugs and close attention will be paid to his behavior during the trial.

With firm Bulgarian Government backing, Mr. Antonov has denied any involvement, and his lawyers say they will produce witnesses to prove that he was in his office at the time of the shooting.

The Other Defendants

These are the other defendants in Italian custody:

¶Omer Bagci, 39, a Turk arrested in Switzerland and extradited to Italy. He is charged with delivering the weapon to Mr. Agca in Milan four days before the shooting.

¶Musa Serdar Celebi, 33, the head of a right-wing Turkish organization in West Germany, accused of aiding Mr. Agca in the plot by assuring him places to stay and channeling large sums of money to him.

The four other defendants, who will be tried in absentia, are:

¶Todor Stoyanov Aivazov, 40, a Bulgarian diplomat and former cashier at the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome, who is accused of supporting the plot.

¶Maj. Zelio Kolev Vasilev, 42, the former deputy military attaché at the Bulgarian Embassy, who together with Mr. Aivazov left Italy in 1982 and is now in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, also accused of complicity.

¶Bekir Celenk, 50, a Turkish racketeer now living in Sofia, whom is charged with procuring the \$1.2 million used to finance the plot and with masterminding it on behalf of "unidentified instigators."

¶Oral Celik, 25, a Turk accused of being a backup gunman in St. Peter's Square. Mr. Celik is at large, but has reportedly been seen in France in recent months.

The Bulgarian Government has refused official Italian requests for extradition to Italy of the three defendants in Sofia. But Italian court officials have said that the court, which consists of two magistrates, including Chief Judge Severino Santiapichi, and six lay judges, or jurors, might apply to travel to Bulgaria to hear the four as witnesses.

Virtually the only uncontested item in the 1,243-page writ of indictment is the fact that Mr. Agca, who was sentenced to death by a Turkish court in 1979 for the murder of a Turkish newspaper editor, shot and wounded the Pope in May 1981.

But conviction hinges on whether the court is convinced by the testimony of Mr. Agca and what Italian justice officials say is a wealth of circumstantial evidence. If convicted, the defendants in Italian custody face lengthy jail sentences.

"It is not necessary to produce a smoking gun," said Virginio Rognoni, who, as Interior Minister at the time of the Pope's shooting, was in charge of police affairs. "The court can bring a conviction on the basis of circumstances."

Improved Relations Sought

The trial is particularly sensitive for the Italian Government because of the implication that the Bulgarian Government, with the possible collusion of the Soviet Union, was responsible for the purported plot against the Polish-born Pope.

Italy has sought to improve its relations with the Moscow and its East bloc allies, including Bulgaria, which soured after Rome decided to station new United States nuclear-tipped cruise missiles on its soil.

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